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## THE LETTERS OF CHARLES ELIOT NORTON\*

A goodly heritage and a lot fallen in a fair ground were those given to Charles Eliot Norton, whose life, delightfully revealed in the *Letters* edited by his daughter, Sara Norton, and by Mr. M. A. DeWolfe Howe, covered almost three quarters of the nineteenth century and eight years of the twentieth, and linked the cultural present with the greatest days of the Victorian age.

Norton was born at Shady Hill, in Cambridge, November, 16, 1827. His father, Andrews Norton, who had only recently acquired this estate, was a scholar devoted to Harvard College, an author, and a leading Unitarian,—though never an ordained minister. The Norton family was of the town of Hingham: Andrews Norton's wife was Catherine Eliot, of Boston. When their son Charles was but an infant, his father and mother made a visit to England, and thus it came about, if a family tradition is correct, that the poet Wordsworth took the baby on his knee and blessed him.

After the Cambridge Classical School and Harvard College, in the régime of President Quincy, had done their best for him, another foreign tour played a great part in the youth's education. He undertook a business career with one of those New England firms which still went down to the sea in ships, and as supercargo for this firm made a voyage to India, returning by way of a trade-route famous in ancient times from India to Venice and Northern Italy. Then he passed to France and to England. After three months more of travel on the Continent he departed for America, completing surely one of the most delightful of "business" trips ever taken by a young man not quite twenty-five. Thus began for Norton the earliest of those many notable friendships, the chronicles of which form perhaps the most charming aspect of the *Letters*. On this journey he met Ary Scheffer, Lamartine, de Vigny, and the Brownings, and the American with whom a life-long intimacy developed, George William Curtis. After four years in the United States, weak-

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\* *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton, with Biographical Comment by His Daughter, Sara Norton, and M. A. DeWolfe Howe.* Illustrated. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1913. Two volumes, vi, 514, 510.

ened health sent him to Europe once more, for another stay of two years. It was in this period that Norton became the devoted friend of John Ruskin; while James Russell Lowell, already one of Norton's best correspondents, left his work in Germany to join Norton in the South of Italy. From 1856 to 1868 Norton was again in New England,—years which brought forth some of his best literary work. In 1868, however, came the golden age of his European experience. He spent five years abroad, in England, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. One sorrow, the deepest of his life, clouded his stay. In Dresden, in 1872, his young wife died. She was Susan Sedgwick, whom Norton had married in 1862. But these were the years of wondrous friendships. Charles Dickens, the Darwins, G. H. Lewes and his wife, Leslie Stephen and his brother Fitzjames, Dean Stanley, Forster, John Stuart Mill, Burne-Jones,—what a company! And besides, excursions with Ruskin and long intimate conversations with Carlyle; these last, especially, reported with delightful detail by Norton in a journal which has been richly culled by the editors. On the return voyage, a fellow-passenger was Emerson. There were other and later voyages to Europe, but they were of brief duration, and none are so fully documented in the *Letters*.

Norton was the embodiment and living expression of trans-Atlantic cultural solidarity,—if one may twist a little the phrase of Norton's friend, Charles Francis Adams, who has but lately departed from us. His earliest writings had indicated a bent towards social studies, but literature soon claimed him for her own. In 1857, with the birth of the *Atlantic Monthly*, began his interest in that magazine, to which he was a frequent contributor. When, in the midst of the war time, the *North American Review* was established, Norton shared the editorship with James Russell Lowell, and wrote many articles both literary and political. Among his extended writings his works on Dante and the various series of letters of Carlyle which he edited stand foremost. If another large category be attempted it may be described under the name “Æsthetics” and illustrated by such books as *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy* and *Historical Studies of Church Building in the Middle Ages*, and may include a host of articles, which, with those in biography and in the fields already mentioned, are sufficiently catalogued in the bibliography appended to the *Letters*. His work as a teacher,

likewise, centered in the Fine Arts and their bearing on life. After a year as lecturer, he became, in 1875, a professor in Harvard University, and continued in that chair for twenty-three years. Of the influence of sweetness and light which he shed upon his students during all this time, loving tributes in the *Letters* give ample testimony.

Noteworthy among Norton's many activities were his fight to save Niagara Falls, his coöperation in the founding of the Cambridge Dante Society, and the establishment, likewise through his initiative, of the Archæological Institute of America. Another institution, begun in 1879, was peculiarly Norton's. This was the annual Dinner for the benefit of the Academy at Ashfield, which throughout twenty-five years made famous the little hill town where Norton had his summer home. These gave occasion for Norton and for many a guest to "speak his mind" on matters of literary or political interest. The last was held in 1903, five years after Norton had become professor emeritus, and five years before he died. His retirement from activity was gradual, and until the very end he remained the same gracious counsellor and kindly critic, though the deaths of his long-time friends, as one by one they left him, saddened his later years.

One other source of grief oppressed him, for the explanation of which some extended comment is necessary. In 1898, in an address to the Men's Club of the Prospect Street Congregational Church, Cambridge, Norton severely attacked the policy and rightfulness of the war with Spain. For this he was bitterly criticised, and by no one more bitterly than by his classmate, Senator Hoar, who wrote that "all lovers of Harvard, and all lovers of the country, have felt for a long time that your relation to the University made your influence bad for the college and bad for the youth of the country," and reproved Norton's "habit of bitter and sneering speech about persons and public affairs." Later a partial reconciliation took place.

Mention of this episode makes proper a few words as to Norton's attitude towards political matters. Coming of the stock from which he sprang, he was of course opposed to slavery; but his criticism was not unsympathetic, and he thought that the burdens of slavery bore more hardly on the white race than on the black. A visit in 1855 to friends in South Carolina, the Middletons, gave him a better insight into the problem of the South, and afforded him the opportunity to write, in letters of

the times, descriptions of Charleston and of Edisto Island that are of rare beauty. Debarred from active service in the war by his lack of physical strength, he gave freely the assistance of his writings. When the end came and the South was defeated, he bore no malice, though he regretted that Johnson opposed negro suffrage. He took evident delight in Carlyle's saying, reported by Lord Russell, "The difference between the North and the South in relation to the nagur is just this,—the South says to the nagur, 'God bless you! and be a slave,' and the North says, 'God damn you! and be free.'" Norton's comment on John Brown was sober, and later he compared with him Frederick Douglass, to the disadvantage of the latter. After his long residence abroad his letters have less to say of the South and of Reconstruction, and indeed of American politics in general, but occasionally there are interesting comments on national issues and on the elections. The career of George W. Curtis he followed with intense interest, and, as would be expected, he sympathized heartily with Civil Service Reform. In 1901 he compared Theodore Roosevelt with McKinley: "Roosevelt is a better man but he has not equally the art and craft by which popularity is to be gained."

If he often wrote pessimistically about his country it was largely due to his dislike of what was crude and ugly. It is a strange phenomenon,—though, perhaps, one that is by no means infrequent,—that this man who lived in such a rich age and lived so *fully*, nevertheless looked back to a better time. More than once he speaks regretfully of the older New England, "during the first thirty years of the century, before the coming in of Jacksonian Democracy, and the invasion of the Irish, and the establishment of the system of Protection," . . . "the pure and innocent age of the Presidency of Monroe or John Quincy Adams." He was thoroughly Europeanized, also. In 1879 he wrote to Ruskin: "My children must have a country, and on the whole this is best for them. I am bound here by duty to them and to my Mother. For my life would doubtless be better in many ways in Europe; but I should be, after all, of less service there than here." To another friend he wrote yet more positively: "I envy the man whose roots draw full nourishment from his native soil. I am half starved here; and in the old world I should be half starved for this strange new one. A thousand years hence, perhaps, America will be old enough for men to

live in it with comfort, and with complete satisfaction." In 1877 he wrote to a younger friend, G. E. Woodberry, who was then Professor of English in the University of Nebraska, and who had evidently written somewhat despairingly of the conditions which he found: "You are probably right in thinking that I would not pass three days in Lincoln. I am getting on in years and have no days to waste. I do not want to go West." He told Woodberry that such trials were the test of character, and comfortingly continued: "There is no fear of your becoming barbarous. You will come back more fastidious (I trust) than ever. I do not expect to see you with war-paint and feathers."

His dislike of the crude and ugly he carried into all his thought. The author of *Church Building in the Middle Ages*, the translator of the *Divina Commedia* felt, of course, the powerful æsthetic appeal of the mediæval Church no less than that of the physical Rome and Italy. But his æsthetic sense was ever under the domination of his critical intellect, and for him the modern churches were of value only as they kept alive the spiritual life of the multitude. Of the materialism of his own country he wrote in 1901: "There is no force to counteract its influence; for Protestantism as a religion has completely failed. It is not the mere breaking down of its dogma, but the fact of its having become, with the progress of science, vacant of spiritual significance, and a church of essentially insincere profession, that is the ruin of Protestantism. It has no spiritual influence with which to oppose the spirit of materialism. If Rome were but a trifle more enlightened, and, instead of opposing, would support and strengthen the American Catholic interpretation of Romanism, the Catholic Church in this country would inevitably gain in spiritual power, and would render an enormous service in standing against the anarchic irreligion of the unchurched multitude. In spite of Roman obscurantism, it seems to me likely that Catholicism will gain strength among us. For science obviously has nothing but a stone to offer the ignorant and dependent masses who are always longing for bread, and the Roman Church offers a convenient and, for those who like it, a wholesome substitute for bread."

For the newest religious manifestation of his native state he had nothing but contempt. He would prefer to see the Roman Church grow "than to see the rapid growth of the most vulgar and debasing of modern sects, that of Christian Science, with

its Mother Eddy and her fatuous inanities, and the superstitious delusions of its votaries. . . . Mother Eddy is the most striking and ugliest figure in New England to-day. She is an illustration of the mediævalism, of which you [S. G. Ward] speak, in its least attractive aspect. It is not only a few but the vast mass of the people even in New England, who are living in the Middle Ages."

Norton's religious thought was, of course, distinctly agnostic; more so, he wrote to Goldwin Smith, than that of Goldwin Smith himself. "The motives for good-conduct and for refraining from ill presented by Christianity seem to me," he continued, "of an essentially selfish order, and although their appeal to selfishness has been urged by priests and ecclesiastics generally, it does not appear to have been of much avail except with the ignorant masses of men. With them it is not likely, whatever changes take place in the comparatively small number of enlightened men, to lose its force. I believe that the motives which impel an intelligent man (who leaves God and Immortality out of his reckoning because inconceivable) to virtuous conduct, are the strongest which can be addressed to a human being, because they appeal directly to the highest qualities of his nature." But Norton made no effort to urge his views upon others: the last thing in the world which he demanded was agreement with his way of thinking. So we may leave him with a sentiment of softer tone, one of the latter paragraphs in the letter to Goldwin Smith which we have quoted above, written just two years before he died: "But why dwell on differences? Here we are, old men, near the end of life, and waiting the end without anxiety or a shadow of fear; perplexed indeed by the mighty mystery of existence and of the universe, and happy in the conviction that the chief lesson of life is that of love."

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